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CHAPTER EIGHT

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MY mother, who had strict ideas about keeping her household a neat family unit of father, mother and children, without dependent aunts and other relatives, had equally strong views about the maintenance of our family ties and traditions, especially as we were now having a Western upbringing in the English schools and not many counteracting lessons at home. Once a year at least, she thought, we should go to have the roots of our beginnings stirred and kept alive. When the younger children were old enough to travel easily, therefore, we went away for each summer vacation.

For her own home, my mother thought a short visit would suffice; the longer visit was paid to my father's family because he could never come with us to see them. In any case, the visits to Thaton were dull for children in those growing up days, all my mother's family like herself had gone into a more worldly life and were settled in their respective professions. The main part of the great house was shut up and empty, and my mother took us there just for a few days to see my aunt, pay a visit to the hpongyi, and to inspect rubber estates which we had just outside Thaton. Then we journeyed on to Ye where my father's family were still living the life he had planned for them when he worked to buy my grandmother her plots of paddy-land.

Our visits to Ye were pure delight. In childhood any change in itself makes a holiday, and the change from our district life to the life at Ye was very great indeed.

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A railway had been built from Moulmein to Ye in 1925; it ended at Ye where passengers travelling further crossed the creek and continued in buses for about 100 miles of mountain road to Tavoy. This was the only overland route to the Tenasserim coast below Ye. We crossed the Martaban-Moulmein ferry in the early morning, ate breakfast with friends while waiting for the connection, and arrived at Ye about 5 in the evening. Ye was by then the headquarters of a township and had a population of about 2,000. It was an extremely congested little town, for the number of its houses and inhabitants had just multiplied without any great changes in its original plan or acreage. The two main streets ran parallel to the creek, and along them the Talaing houses were packed, with only three to four feet of space between every few houses to give access from creek to road and from one road to another.

taking life. Only the hardened ones of the village, *ta-nga-thès*, drew and netted in the wealth of fish around Ye, and the theoretical condemnation in which their profession was held absolved all good Buddhists from any sin in eating the fruits of their labours. My aunts bought vast quantities of fish for salting and drying. This cured fish supplied our yearly needs as well as theirs. They also bought prawns to press into a paste called *ngapi*, in this case *seinsa* ngapi, which forms the basis of all our flavouring and condiments. As soon as the ta-nga-thè came up with his boatloads of prawns they were spread out on rough bamboo mats and sunned on the big platform behind the house. When they were fairly dried, my aunts, with a helper or two from the village, mashed up the prawns by hand, throwing in vast quantities of salt as they worked. The mess was left in the sun for a few days, being stirred every now and again. By this time it had turned into a grey-black paste, more or less smooth, smelling most pungent and rotten to foreigners but *hmoay-dè*, fragrant, to us, and tasting like a concentrate of anchovy. This paste is stored in small glazed earthenware jars. It is used to flavour all meat and vegetables dishes, or is fried or pounded with other ingredients to provide condiments for the meal. The Tenasserim coast is the chief source of seinsa ngapi in Burma, the big towns of Tavoy and Mergui supplying towns in Upper Burma as well. The large amounts of salt needed come from the valuable salt fields in this area which produce about 6,000 tons annually.

It can be imagined what excitement a holiday at Ye caused us in our growing years, and even my mother's admonitions that we were to behave in accordance with strict Burmese ideas which prevailed at Ye rather than the un-Burmese habits acquired at school did not dampen our excitement. We were then at English-speaking schools where we had adopted the habit of calling each other by name. The eldest of my young sisters Mya Mya, is seven years younger than I am, but when she went to school I had only two sisters left who called me respectfully, *Ma-Ma Gyi*, elder sister, and by the time the youngest was at school there was no Ma Ma Gyi left in the family. The tradition of the younger ones fetching and carrying for the elder had also sadly deteriorated.

At meals, my mother had not kept up the custom of helping the eldest person present with a portion of every dish before it was open to the rest of the company. Before we went to Ye, therefore, my mother gathered us around her and told us how we were to behave so as to give our grandmother and aunts great pleasure in our visit and no rude shocks. "Now don't forget, *the-mi-to*, my daughters, you will all three call your sister Big-Elder-Sister; you, Pusu, are to call Mya Mya Middle-Elder-Sister, and Aye Little-Elder-Sister. In fact you should

593 always do so, at home and everywhere else, but mother understands
177. that you make habits easily at your English school. Never walk into
57 the house with your slippers on, as you do in the downstairs room here. When you eat with your grandmother and aunts, don't touch anything until your aunts have put a little of it into Grandmother's plate. And try not to talk to one another in English." All the way in the train my sisters would fling themselves at me and shout, "Big Elder Sister, Big Big Elder Sister."

• 528 We went to Ye during our summer holidays which were the longest
592 in the school year and allowed us three weeks with my father and a
264 month at Ye. It also enabled us to pay obeisance to our grandmother at the New Year, and to celebrate this loveliest of festivals in its most fitting surroundings. My Uncle San Lin usually sent his wife and our four small cousins at the same time, so that for one month in the year at least Grandmother could feel that the world of big towns and English civilization had not robbed her of any family affection. Sleeping and eating arrangements for the gathering of twenty odd people were no problems for the simple large-scale economy of the household. My mother had a bed, and beside it my Aunt Khin and all the children slept on thinbyus laid side by side on the platform upper storey. Meals were eaten in successive rounds at a low table on the kitchen floor, not served as separate sittings, but by calling more diners as places were vacated, and filling each dish that diminished from the stove near-by.

529 Half of our visit to Ye was spent at the garden where we were
177 surrounded by rich fruits and could bathe in the clear swift water that rushed through islands of reeds. We walked and rode in bullock carts,

for miles, to visit other gardens owned by Grandmother's friends—old men and women who lived there all the time, and who chuckled with delight to see us, for to them we were not ourselves, not ordinary

children such as were playing about them. We were ready-made reproductions sent back by my father and Uncle San Lin who disappeared into an unknown world many years ago. At house after house, and at the same houses year after year, we sat in a row on the benches they kept on the verandahs of all houses, eight children awkward and restrained, while the old people peered and chuckled at us: "Yes, that is San Lin, all right—but there is Htwa Yin's nose; look at this expression, it is Maung Chit Kaing himself—oh but look here, here is the image of Maung Pyant, yes, exactly Maung Pyant, hullo you little Pyant, oh, look at her." This was my poor sister Mya Mya whose face seemed to be the quintessence of the features of my father and all his brothers and sisters. My sister Aye and I, who had the good fortune to take after my mother's family, were noticed very little during these visits, but my poor little Mya Mya sat there solemn and unhappy, thrusting her face out until even to us she looked comically like the forty-year-old aunts and uncles.

When I think back on eating the fruits of Grandmother's garden, they seem to have the quality of some heavenly ambrosia about them. They were all such luscious fruits. For example, the durian, the fruit which foreigners describe as smelling most foul, usually had in Rangoon only a thin layer of the precious golden flesh around the seeds. In this garden we ate only *shwe-dinga* durians, gold-sovereign durians, whose flesh was so soft and full that a gold coin could be stood on edge on the seed and be buried in it. Moreover, the eating of durians in excess was usually discouraged anywhere else, because of the heating qualities of the fruit, but here they grew beside the cooling mangosteen, which we always ate after the durian. This delicious fruit never travels successfully; even from district to district it gets bruised and stained. The mangosteen tree was most exciting to me as a child. It was full of dark foliage and the distilled nectar of the snow-white fruit seemed to be enclosed in bitterness and fraught with dangers, for the thick skin which contains tannin was bitter, its stain was indelible and to be kept carefully away from our clothes, and the fruit itself was said to be poisonous when eaten with sugar. This was owing to the belief that the sap of the rind made a toxic combination with sugar. Even the coconuts in Ye had a succulence about them. They were so abundant in the garden that we discarded all the fruit in which the meat had hardened beyond the *zun-chit*, the "spoon-scrape", stage when the flesh was of such tenderness that it could be scraped up with a spoon as a transparent jelly, to be put into the drink of coconut water. We were encouraged to drink this because it was said to make the heat "kick" and come out of the system. The grains of the pomeloes also were swollen